The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture · Vol 19.1 · December 2025 · 28-58.
DOI: 10.30395/WSR.202512_19(1).0003

"The Black Boys Will Put Up Their Hopes": African American Affective Space, Memory, and Cultural Trauma in Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*❖

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ABSTRACT

Post-2016, African American cultural trauma and memory have had a huge influence on Colson Whitehead's work. The weight of these ideas began in *The Underground Railroad* in 2016, but they are most explicit in his 2019 novel *The Nickel Boys*. This article interprets Whitehead's 2019 novel via a combination of Ron Eyerman's African American cultural trauma and memory theories, Michael Omi and Howard Winant's "Racial Formation" theories, and Critical Race Theory, linking them to African American affective subjectivities. Of particular interest is the hope created, lost, and felt within the timespaces occupied by the novel's two protagonists. By engaging with Setha Low's formulations of the social production and construction of space, Brian Massumi's notions regarding affective transition, and Sara Ahmed's theories on hope, this article will argue that *The Nickel Boys* ultimately demonstrates that through the processing of shared cultural trauma and memory, African Americans can achieve "hope for a future fulfilled."

❖ This article is a reworking of a section in the second chapter of my doctoral dissertation *Ghosts in the Darkness: African American Subject Positions and Affective Subjectivities in the Novels of Colson Whitehead*. The chapter compared the hope (or lack thereof) felt by Whitehead's protagonists in *Sag Harbor* (2009) and *The Nickel Boys* (2019) and its effects on their African American subject positions. Here the section on *The Nickel Boys* has been thoroughly revised and adapted to focus on the themes of African American cultural trauma and memory.

[*] Received: May 30, 2024; Accepted: February 8, 2025

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KEYWORDS: Colson Whitehead, *The Nickel Boys*, Cultural Trauma, Memory, African American Affective Subjectivity

「非裔男孩們將抱起希望」：科爾森・懷特黑德《鎳克爾男孩》中的非裔美國人的情感空間、記憶和文化創傷

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摘　要

2016 年後，非裔美國人的文化創傷和記憶對科爾森・懷特海德的作品產生了巨大影響。這些想法的分量始於 2016 年的《地下鐵路》，但在他 2019 年的小說《鎳克爾男孩》中表現得最為明確。本文結合羅恩・艾爾曼（Ron Eyerman）的非裔美國人文化創傷和記憶理論、邁克爾・奧米（Michael Omi）和霍華德·溫南特（Howard Winant）的「種族形成」理論以及批判性種族理論，解釋了懷特海德 2019 年的小說，並將它們與非裔美國人的情感主體性聯繫起來。特別令人感興趣的是小說中兩位主角所佔據的時間空間中創造、失去和感受到的希望。通過參與塞莎・洛（Setha Low）關於空間的社會生產和建構的表述、布萊恩・馬蘇米（Brian Massumi）關於情感轉變的概念以及薩拉・艾哈邁德（Sara Ahmed）關於希望的理論，本文將論證《鎳克爾男孩》最終證明，通過處理共同的文化創傷和記憶，非裔美國人可以實現「對未來的希望」。

關鍵詞：科爾森・懷特海德、《鎳克爾男孩》、文化創傷、記憶、非裔美國人的情感主體性

*本文 113 年 5 月 30 日收件；114 年 2 月 8 日審查通過。
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As its title suggests, Ron Eyerman's *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (2001) proposes that African American identity is formed through the shared cultural trauma and memory of slavery. Eyerman argues for slavery as a collective memory that induces trauma as opposed to slavery as merely an institution or experience (1). For Eyerman:

> Collective memory specifies the temporal parameters of past and future, where we came from and where we are going, and also why we are here now. Within the narrative provided by this collective memory individual identities are shaped as experimental frameworks formed out of, as they are embedded within, narratives of past, present and future. (6)

This implies that the collective memory of slavery defines who African Americans are by explaining how they got to where they are now and how this will inform where they will go in the future. Eyerman argues that by looking at African American racial formation and identity from this perspective there is a shift from the social and anthropological sciences toward language-based, text-oriented analysis in literature whereby more attention is being paid to the importance of collective memory in the formation of ethnic identity, and the role of literary works in the reflective process. Eyerman's study acts as an important link between African American anthropology/sociology and African American literary theory as the past represented through collective memory "is not only recollected, and thus represented through language, it is also recalled, imagined, through association with artifacts, some of which have been arranged and designated for that purpose" (9). Eyerman quotes Craig Barton to support the argument that "as a social construct and concept, race has a profound influence on the spatial development of the American landscape, creating separate though sometimes parallel, overlapping or even superimposed cultural landscapes for black and white Americans" (qtd. in Eyerman 9). It is slavery that haunts all American space for black Americans and Eyerman adapts his argument to various points in African American history where the memetic emotional resonance of slavery may be different but is still felt on some level by the black minority.

This emotional resonance felt by the black minority underscores the idea that there are specific issues, experiences, and histories unique to informing a

particular minority group's sense of self that are unchangeable. No external social or anthropological research can truly qualify a particular minority experience, especially regarding its emotional and unconscious facets. Therefore, one cannot only use social or anthropological theories and studies to explain African American subjectivities and their impact on African American autonomy. Rather, it is more useful to engage with *affective* subjectivity. Affect creates a unique form of subjectivity that is grounded not as much on rationality as it is on emotion. For subaltern groups, affective subjectivities are particularly important because the rationality of the spaces they occupy often actively attempt to quell their agency. According to Brian Massumi, affect "gives the body's movements a kind of depth that stays with it across all its transitions—accumulating in memory, in habit, in reflex, in desire, in tendency" (4). Therefore, it is affect that encourages in African Americans the creation of a subjectivity that gives them the power to mobilize.

Prior to the publication of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* in 2016,[1] both literary critics and Colson Whitehead himself intimated his work was more supportive of diverse black subjectivity and the use of individual ironic expression than uniform black identity and the use of African American shared cultural trauma and memory. Critics such as Derek C. Maus in the first edition of *Understanding Colson Whitehead* published in 2014, referred to Whitehead as a "postsoul" writer (7), wherein "post-soul culture revels in the contingency and diversity of blackness, and subjects the canon of positive images to subversion and parody" (Tate 631). Maus concludes that race is "far from [Whitehead's] only or even chief concern" and that Whitehead "parodies and appropriates the conventions of literary genres" (*Understanding* [2014] 15). Marlon Lieber[2] also argues that Whitehead's novels "read race relationally," meaning they "might be set in worlds that bear the marks of the long history of racialized domination in the United States, yet they do not treat race as a category that immediately serves to explain characters' motivations or the

[1] *The Underground Railroad* (the novel which preceded the publication of *The Nickel Boys*) was the first of Whitehead's novels to deal directly with the issue of African American slavery and the cultural trauma it entails.

[2] Marlon Lieber's interpretation of Whitehead's work in *Reading Race Relationally: Embodied Dispositions and Social Structures in Colson Whitehead's Novels* was published in 2023, four years after *The Nickel Boys* was published. Lieber's thesis contends that "Whitehead consistently rejects substantialist notions of race and identity" (30). However, Lieber does not use *Nickel* in his study, simply stating without a reason in a footnote that it won't be discussed (40). This suggests that Lieber excludes it because *Nickel*'s themes *do* imply a substantialist notion of race as this paper argues.

structures of the novels' plot," implying that race is not an "essence" but rather "a category which is constituted by social relations" (20).

These ideas ran parallel to the rise in prominence of postblack theory after the election of Barack Obama in 2008, which contended that although racism was still present in America, an African American literature in which characters can have subject positions and experiences that are not solely defined through their race should now be emphasized. At the forefront of postblackness were two cultural critics: bell hooks and Touré. In *Writing Beyond Race* (2013) bell hooks stated that "to value ourselves rightly we are called to move beyond race" and "recognize that ethnicity, that skin color, are but one fragment of a holistic identity" (198). Touré's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?* (2011) argues in a similar vein, acknowledging that "to experience the full possibilities of Blackness, you must break free of the strictures sometimes placed on Blackness from outside the African American culture and also from within it" (4). Whitehead's work prior to *Underground* foregrounds his black protagonists' individuality over their racial identity arguably because he also extended this idea to his own identity. For example, in a 2016 interview with Boris Kachka for *Vulture*, Whitehead insisted that foregrounding his individuality allowed him to be "free to just have an eccentric career and not conform to some idea of what a black writer [had] to do" and not worry about the "burden of representation" (122).

However, since the 2010s, African Americans have witnessed the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of George Zimmerman; the rise of white nationalism and the election of Donald Trump; the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the Black Lives Matter protests; and the increased prominence of race culture wars with the Republican Party's demonization of Critical Race Theory. With the release of Whitehead's novel *The Nickel Boys* in mid-2019, the African American zeitgeist had completely shifted. In an interview with Sean O'Hagan for *The Guardian* in 2020, Whitehead reflected on what had happened in the United States over the past decade and how it influenced him as an author:

> If you choose to write about institutionalized racism and our capacity for evil, you could write about 1850 or 1963 or 2020 and it all applies unfortunately. It's ongoing and it will be ongoing for many years. . . . [A]s I've been writing about it over the last couple

> of years, I've also been living with these periodic conversations about police brutality. They get very loud, and then grow quiet again, and then become louder when something else happens. In a way, that's been my whole life, but especially over the last couple of years. So, just on a personal level, to have it become this immediate and to see it now affecting my kids' lives in a different way has been exhausting. (O'Hagan)

Whitehead's attitude toward the progress of African Americans had also shifted. The promise of a postrace President Obama America was illusory. There was a return to the realist and naturalist philosophies of prior African American studies as the post-2016 era highlighted, emboldened, and exacerbated the institutionalized racism found throughout the United States. The original proponents of the postblack ideal were no longer singing the praises of a postblack America, rather they conceded it would never come to fruition. In an article written by Touré in 2019 he paralleled what Whitehead said. He acknowledged that there would be very little difference between the early days of slavery in 1619 and Donald Trump's America in 2016 and, undeniably, "the way we approach race would feel very familiar . . . the president's white supremacy would seem entirely normal . . . because the roots of modern American racism were put down by those early European colonizers: the road to Trump begins in America's first years" (Touré, "Slavery"). This is a far cry from Touré's earlier pronouncements after the election of Barack Obama in 2008 when he argued that America's racist history (and any memory of it) should no longer influence its present.

Critics' perspectives on Whitehead's writing also shifted. In Maus's introduction to the 2019 interview collection *Conversations with Colson Whitehead*, Maus retracted his previous assessment of Whitehead, stating that race now signifies in the bulk of his fiction (xi). Maus previously argued that Whitehead's conclusions tended toward the parodic and cynical when trying to reconcile black individuality with the burden of black collective identity. However, with *Underground* Maus observed that Whitehead presents a "rosier output" for his protagonists when endeavoring to resolve the conflict between black individuality and black group identity (Introduction xv). In Maus' 2021

revised and expanded edition of *Understanding Colson Whitehead*,[3] he highlights a 2019 *TIME* magazine article by Mitchell S. Jackson that "rightly noted" how *Underground* and *Nickel* "stand apart [from Whitehead's other writing] in that they most directly satisfy a mandate set out by W.E.B. Dubois . . . for black writers to create work in service of justice" (48). Whitehead now emphasizes the autonomy and justice that can be gained through black shared trauma as opposed to how his black protagonists prior to *Underground* and *Nickel* endeavored to attain independence by rejecting or ignoring shared black memory, experience, and identity.

Post-2016, there was an increase in prominence of new black writers who focused on the persistence of racist ideology that they claimed was autochthonous to the American way of life. Two noteworthy writers/academics of this movement are Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates. Hannah-Jones is the co-creator of the "1619 Project" for *The New York Times*, which aimed to reframe United States' history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of black Americans at the very center of its national narrative. Coates, writing in *Between the World and Me*, argued that "Americans believe in the reality of 'race' as a defined, indubitable feature of the natural world [and] racism—the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them—inevitably follows from this inalterable condition" (7). Both Hannah-Jones's and Coates's arguments relay the effects the memory of American slavery has had on American culture and the institutionalized racism that is still practiced to this day in the United States. The supposition that race is an aberrational infliction—in other words, that racism is the product of irrational individual pathologies which are "cured" through exposure and education—is faulty. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States*, this flawed belief neglects "both the institutional and ideological nature of race in America" and "the systemic presence of racial dynamics in such social spheres as education,

[3] It should be noted that although Maus acknowledges this shift in Whitehead's writing in his 2019 introduction to *Conversations* and his 2021 revised introduction to *Understanding*, Maus' overall conclusion in the revised *Understanding* is (confusingly) still what he presented in the first edition prior to the publication of *Underground* and *Nickel*. That is his "novels end with ambiguous or even incomplete resolutions that confound readers searching for concrete instructions about what to think or how to act" (*Understanding*, revised ed.). Specifically with *Nickel*, Maus claims that its conclusion is ambivalent about restorative justice and Whitehead is "purposefully silent about the ramifications of Turner's inevitable return [to Florida to tell of his experience at Nickel]." This paper argues to the contrary.

art, social policy, law, religion, and science," and so ignores the "specificity of racism and racial conflict in the United States" (10). Omi and Winant's "Racial Formation" theory hypothesized that "race is a matter of *both* social structure and cultural representation" (56; emphasis added).

Omi and Winant's two-component "Racial Formation" theory connects to two other African American Studies' discourses. The first is Critical Race Theory (CRT), which connects to Racial Formation via social construction. CRT is presently the most well-known and notoriously contentious race-related theory.[4] CRT is not a new concept; it started in the 1970s as a part of American law studies and shifted out into a more public discourse surrounding the relationship between race, racism, and power in the United States towards the end of the late 1980s. CRT considered itself broader than conventional ethnic and civil rights studies as it placed those studies in "a broader perspective that included economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, emotions, and the unconscious" and "questions the very foundation of the [American] liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law" (Delgado and Stefancic 3). This interrogation into the fundamental principles of the American way of life has made CRT proponents challenge the notion that "'blindness' to race will eliminate racism" and, in turn, contend that "self-conscious racial identities [are] the source of individual fulfilment, collective strength and incisive policy making" (Valdes et al. 1). Multiple incidents of race-based police brutality, race-based court judgements, and race-based bills and policies have become more and more commonplace in the news since 2016.[5] The omnipresence of these stories in the news over the past few years and the need to explain the apparent rise in these incidences has re-highlighted CRT, especially by the Black Lives Matter movement and by journalists, critics, and scholars such as Nikole Hannah-Jones and Ta-Nehisi Coates. This is because CRT emphasizes race and racism in the United States as something that is ordinary and *not* aberrational. Critical race theorists Valdes, McCristal Culp, and Harris explain CRT's position as follows:

[4] See the 30 June 2021 *The Guardian* article by Julia Carrie Wong entitled "From Viral Videos to Fox News: How Rightwing Media Fueled the Critical Race Theory Panic."

[5] See the George Zimmerman case in relation to police brutality, the Breonna Taylor case in relation to court judgements, and the Georgia redistricting of congressional maps in relation to bills and policies.

> Critical race theorists have located racism and its everyday operation in the very structures within which the guilty and the innocent were to be identified: not individual "bad-apple" police officers, but the criminal justice system; not bigoted school-board members, but the structures of segregation and wealth transmission . . . CRT describe[es] and critique[es] not a world of bad actors, wronged victims, and innocent bystanders, but a world in which all of us are more or less complicit in sociolegal webs of domination and subordination. (2)

Whitehead's referencing his experience "living with these periodic conversations about police brutality . . . over the last couple of years" in the previously mentioned Sean O'Hagan *Guardian* interview indicates his awareness of a "new" African American realism brought about by the events of the past years. This is further explicated in a 2019 interview for CBS News, when Whitehead was asked by interviewer Lee Cowan about his inspiration for *The Nickel Boys*:

> It was the summer of 2014 and a lot of things [were] going on in the news. It was the summer [of] Eric Garner. And it seemed, at least in my life, [there] always had [been] this conversation about police brutality and then it goes away. And it's Rodney King, it's Amadou Diallo, Patrick Dorismond. And then the summer of '14, Michael Brown. And I came across the story of Dozier in the news.[6] And it seemed part of this process we have where no one is ever sort of called to account for what they've done. An unarmed black boy is killed and no one's ever brought to justice. And there's a school, Dozier, which I never heard of, open for 110 years. And people come forward; they're ignored. Reforms are briefly put into place, and then ignored. (Cowan)

Even prior to the publication of *The Nickel Boys*, Michael Cohen told Whitehead, while interviewing him for *Scribd.com* for *The Underground Railroad* in 2016, that in "the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, and in the midst of a hellish [2016] presidential campaign . . . [*The Underground*

[6] The real-life Florida school that was the inspiration for the Nickel Academy in *The Nickel Boys*.

Railroad] deeply trouble[ed] any notions—especially white liberal notions—of historical progress in the field of race relations" (153-54). With both *Underground* and *Nickel*, Whitehead moved beyond his "postblack" label and became more interested in re-highlighting/re-remembering how race plays an intrinsic role in all American lives—how it is "ordinary and not aberrational" (Delgado and Stefancic 8).

The second African American studies discourse linked to Omi and Winant's two-component "Racial Formation" theory is the originally mentioned "Cultural Trauma" theory of Ron Eyerman. Cultural Trauma connects to Racial Formation via Racial Formation's focus on cultural representation. Cultural representation is specific. Each cultural/ethnic group has particular issues, experiences, memories, and histories unique to informing their sense of self that are unchangeable. Eyerman argues that *collective* African American identity/memory (as opposed to *individual* identity/memory) is "filtered through" the cultural trauma of slavery, which means that "slavery . . . will be recalled every time the collective is questioned" (221). Like CRT, Eyerman's ideas are concomitant with "setting, group and self-interest, emotions, and the unconscious." What is more, Eyerman's concepts (despite being published over twenty years ago) support the viewpoints of today's prominent post-2016 African American scholars and critics Hannah-Jones and Coates, who argue for the centrality of race and the history of slavery in everyday American life. There will always be an African American hegemonic structure that overshadows any notions of African American individual autonomy. Although postblack critics argued that this idea was restrictive, Eyerman counters that "progress can mean something else other than shedding or overcoming the past" (222).

Because the cultural trauma and collective memory of slavery is something that is shared by all African Americans, Eyerman's ideas surrounding cultural trauma have an unmistakable connection to definitions of affect. Cultural trauma and affective subjectivities are triggered by interpellated and hegemonized cultural and historical codes. Furthermore, cultural trauma and affective subjectivities do not only exist in an individual but are contagious and spread to others within a group.

The potential for using affect and cultural trauma/memories to inform African American subjectivity is present in all of Whitehead's earlier work, yet the majority of his pre-2016 protagonists tend to ignore or outright reject them,

which in turn leads to (in the very least) ambiguous outcomes for Whitehead's protagonists. This paper proposes that post-2016, the renewed academic focus on CRT and its connections to African American cultural trauma and collective memory have had a huge influence on Whitehead's new work. The weight of these ideas began to appear in *The Underground Railroad* in 2016, but they are the most explicit in his 2019 novel *The Nickel Boys*.

I. Finding Freedom in the Captive Spaces of *The Nickel Boys*

The Nickel Boys is a fictionalized retelling of incidents at the Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida. Dozier was a reform school which operated for 111 years until its closure in 2011. The school was eventually shut down because there were continual allegations of abuse, beatings, rape, torture, and even murder of students by staff. After the school closed, archaeology and anthropology students from the University of South Florida exhumed the grounds and discovered 55 unmarked graves outside of the school cemetery, confirming the abuse and murder allegations brought against the school. Furthermore, the findings of the investigation into these deaths at the Dozier school discovered that, comparatively, three times as many black students as white students died and were buried at Dozier. When asked by Dave Davies in an interview for *Fresh Air* on NPR in 2019 why he wanted to write about the subject after coming across the story in 2014, Whitehead stated that he felt compelled to write about the school because the story stuck with him:

> If there's one place like this, there are many places . . . [and] maybe it's a reform school, it's an orphanage . . . [and] it seemed, if the story [of these unidentified victims] hadn't been told, someone needed to tell it. (Davies).

Whitehead's retelling in *The Nickel Boys* concerns the "Nickel Academy," a fictionalized stand-in for the Dozier school in Florida where the same types of abuse occurs. Whitehead's coming-of-age novel examines the experiences of two teenage black boys—Elwood and Turner—who are sent to the school around the early 1960s. Elwood is a straight-laced and book-smart African American teen who finds inspiration in the black civil rights movement of the time and is raised by his strict grandmother in Florida. Falsely accused of

stealing a car, Elwood is sent to the Nickel Academy where he meets Turner. Turner is a far more cynical black youth, who is often at odds with Elwood's continual optimism about getting out of the Nickel Academy despite all the abuse they experience there. The boys develop a strong bond and eventually attempt to escape together. The novel takes place in two historical presents, namely Elwood and Turner as teens at the Nickel Academy in Florida and Elwood as an adult in New York. The third-person narration of the novel at first limits its omniscience to the teen and adult Elwood, but then it gradually shifts to Turner. This is because at the end of the novel it is revealed that the adult "Elwood" is, in actuality, Turner, who took his identity after Elwood was shot and killed by the staff of the Nickel Academy when they made their escape.

The spatiotemporality of *The Nickel Boys* is complex, written in two timespaces (Florida in the 1960s and New York in the 1970s to present) and utilizing multiple limited-omniscient third-person narrations (Elwood, Turner, adult Elwood/Turner). Furthermore, *Nickel* alludes to a real traumatic event that is understood by and has memetic resonance for many African Americans. In fact, in the aforementioned interview for NPR's *Fresh Air*, Whitehead references how researching the school while developing the characters of Elwood and Turner for the novel enforced the shared memory, affect and cultural trauma of the event:

> The deeper I got in and the more I read about Elwood and Turner, my two main characters, the more . . . I had a sense of real physical dread and anger thinking about the place. And then I realized I was not going to go. And if I was going to go, it would be with some dynamite or a bulldozer. I think it's an evil place. (Davies)

Whitehead's potent emotional response to the Dozier school again highlights a moving away from the pre-2016 postrace emphasis on African American individualism in his writing and a moving toward explicating a shared African American trauma and memory. The subversion in the novel comes from the surprising ways whereby Whitehead's two protagonists cognitively map their situations, highlighting the "usual way [American] society does business, the common, everyday [racialized] experience of most people of color in [the United States]," as argued by the tenets of CRT (Delgado and Stefancic 8). This article will first focus on the cognitive mapping of Elwood and Turner in the

two key spaces in the novel and then explain how both conform to and challenge reader expectations.

To understand reader expectations of the timespaces of *The Nickel Boys*, one needs to have a better understanding of *Nickel*'s chronotopes. Because *Nickel* is more akin to African American realist fiction, one needs to make use of the concrete history of its settings to fully understand what they mean to the memories of the author, his fictional characters, and the readers of the novel. The American South in the 1960s is a specific chronotope in African American literature that has explicit meanings and generates expectations for readers. Claudine Raynaud summarizes the timespace of African American "Southern" coming-of-age novels as "a strange land for the black adolescent, the territory of a history of suffering and survival" where "the imprint of the South is also a harbinger of the choice between rebellion and submissiveness for the African American hero or heroine," the choice of which "becomes a crucial alternative leading to death, self- or other-inflicted, or a critical decision regarding the path of one's life" (110).[7] Raynaud implies that the setting (and memory) of the American South is one fraught with danger and negative outcomes for African American protagonists.

The dangers and negative outcomes for African American protagonists in the South are a result of both the social production and social construction of the American Southern space. According to Setha Low, the social production of space:

> illuminates how a space or place comes into existence . . . [opening] up questions about the political, economic, and historical motives of its planning and development [by emphasizing] the *material* aspects of space and place-making [and] also [uncovering] the manifest and latent ideologies that underlie this materiality. (34; emphasis added)

In contrast, Low states that the social construction of space "assumes place and space are abstractions" and *not* a set of physical properties, but rather "made up of shared understandings and social structural differences such as race, class,

[7] Raynaud is specifically referencing Anne Moody's novel *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1970) in this quote, but I believe the description can be applied to most African American coming-of-age novels set in the American South.

and gender" (68). Thus, the focus of social construction emphasizes the meanings of space and place as developed through people's "social interactions, memories, feelings, imaginings, and daily use—or lack thereof—that are made into places, scenes, and actions that convey particular meanings" (Low 68). Both social production (the physical spaces and what they represent) and social construction (the connotations extracted by particular people within spaces) are important in understanding the inherent dangers and predetermined negative outcomes within the timespaces and the memories thereof in *The Nickel Boys*.

Ideologically, the American South in African American literature is remembered and functions foremost as a "white supremacist society," meaning "the Southern economy, culture, and society [are] fundamentally shaped by, and built upon, the enslavement of blacks and the privileging of whiteness" that is also irrevocably entwined with "a powerful scientific racist discourse" and "democratic ideology" that "convinced all whites that only bondage enabled black and whites to coexist without massive social trauma" (Brown and Webb 101). Thus, when presented with a Southern space, especially pre-civil rights, one recollects it as a setting which primarily functions to subjugate black people and elevate white people. Any constructed space in the South is structured and manipulated to enact this form of social control. In Whitehead's novel, the Nickel Academy was built as:

> [A] reform school where the young offender of law, separated from vicious associates, may receive physical, intellectual, and moral training, be reformed and restored to the community with purpose and character fitting for a good citizen, an honorable and honest man with a trade or skilled occupation fitting such person for self-maintenance. (74)

This description, which Elwood reads off a school pamphlet while recovering in the school hospital after a violent beating by the school staff, reveals the explicit and implicit ideological meaning of the material space. Whitehead exposes the true function of the Nickel Academy by ironically juxtaposing the pamphlet quote against what has just happened to Elwood and his treatment by the doctor and nursing staff in the school hospital in the aftermath.

In relation to the social construction of space, Miles Richardson argues that by transforming "experience into symbols" people are able to give space

particular meanings and this "construction of social reality occurs through the symbolic processes by which human experience and feelings become anchored to elements of the material environment (qtd. in Low 72).[8] In *The Nickel Boys*, for trying to break up a fight between three other boys, Elwood is taken to "The White House," a "single-story rectangular building" that sits "midway between the colored and white campuses" of the school (Whitehead 60). It is in "The White House" that students are beaten, tortured, or even killed for any transgressions. The black boys of the Nickel Academy call the building "The White House" because "that was its official name and it fit and didn't need to be embellished . . . [it] delivered the law and everybody obeyed" (64). When Elwood enters "The White House" and awaits his punishment he realizes why very few students attempt to escape from the reform school, "[The White House] was why the school had no wall or fence or barbed wire around it, why so few boys ran: It was the wall that kept them in" (65). Despite being a place where both black and white students are punished, it is made clear that only black boys are "taken out back" beyond the "The White House" and behind the stables never to be seen again, as explained to Elwood by Turner:

> "This is *out back*," Turner said. "They say once in a while they take a black boy here and shackle him up to those [iron rings]. Arms spread out. Then they get a horse whip and tear him up."
>
> Elwood made two fists, then caught himself. "No white boys?"
>
> "The White House, they got integrated. This place is separate. They take you out back they don't bring you to the hospital. They put you down as escaped and that's that, boy." (102-03)

Having the black students name the structure "The White House" and having them be aware of an "out back" place beyond it which could erase their existence, makes explicit a connection between governmental power and black suppression in the American South. This is further exacerbated by Whitehead describing the extent of Elwood's injuries and his poor treatment by the medical staff in the hospital, particularly the ward nurse Wilma, whom Elwood

[8] From Richardson's journal article "c: Material Culture and the Construction of Reality" in *American Ethnologist* issue 9, 1982, pp. 421-36.

describes as "a haunted doll come to hideous life, something out of horror comics . . . [which] he'd noticed, delivered two kinds of punishment—completely undeserved, and sinister justice for the wicked," with Elwood believing he was the victim of the former (71). Again, Elwood's concession—that he will suffer punishment that is unjustified but which could also possibly be because he is somehow "wicked"—emphasizes the interpellated ideology of the space. Elwood, within the space of the Nickel Academy, is made to believe that he deserves punishment (and subjugation) simply for being black. The central "physical, intellectual, and moral training" (74) in the space for black students is, in actuality, just physical abuse, intellectual deprivation, and dubious morality. Ergo, the physical structure and function of Nickel reinforces racist Southern ideology, which, in turn, underpins the 1960s American South chronotope in African American literature as a timespace of danger and negative outcomes for young black protagonists.

Low uses the term "social reproduction" to describe the "conditions necessary to reproduce social class" which includes the mechanisms whereby "everyday activities, beliefs, and practices, as well as social and spatial structures transmit social inequality to the next generation" (40). However, according to Low, "social reproduction also includes "resistance to these spatial arrangements, structures, and activities through passive interventions, social movements, and political mobilization also characterizes the social production process" (40). In *The Nickel Boys*, regardless of the American South's racist ideology that is the foundation and impetus behind the built spaces of the Nickel Academy, the black boys of Nickel still seem motivated to rebel, manipulate, and use the space to their advantage. This idea can be tethered to Raynaud's description of the African American southern coming-of-age chronotope as it includes a "choice between rebellion and submissiveness for the African American hero or heroine" (110). However, what motivates black protagonists to choose rebellion over subjugation despite their (and the reader's) recognition of the paucity of positive outcomes for young black people in the American South?

Elwood has this drive because of another important facet to the 1960s American South chronotope in African American literature. During the 1960s in the American South, the civil rights movement was at its zenith. Although black people in the South had mobilized with increased force against white supremacy since the New Deal era of the 1930s, the major "direct action phase

of protest" was at its height in the 1950s and 1960s (Brown and Webb 290). Elwood, as the main protagonist, finds inspiration to rebel because of the civil rights movement that is continually referenced by Whitehead as a part of the novel's setting. The album *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* is noted as "the best gift of [Elwood's] life . . . even if the ideas it put in his head were his undoing," and with "every scratch and pop it gathered over the months . . . a mark of [Elwood's] enlightenment, tracking each time he entered into a new understanding of the reverend's words. The crackle of truth" (Whitehead 9). Elwood regards the successes of the civil rights movement as something which promises hope for his future. When the verdict of *Brown v. Board of Education* is announced, he thinks to himself, "it [is] only a matter of time before all the invisible walls [come] down. . . . He was sure of it" (16). Further examples of how the civil rights movement galvanizes Elwood's rebellion are the photo essays in *Life* magazine which "conveyed him to the front lines, to bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, to counter sit-ins in Greensboro . . . [providing] models for the man he wished to become" (20). Elwood, desperate to be like those activists in the photographs, seeks out and participates in a civil rights demonstration, which changes him even more, making him feel "somehow *closer* to himself" (35). Even after his incarceration at Nickel, because of the palpability of the civil rights movement at that time, he can still find motivation and inspiration in the staff of Nickel who brutally enforce the suppressive racist dogma of the American South:

> Nurse Wilma was almost sweet to the white boys . . . a second mother. Nary a kind word for the black boys . . . More than once in [Elwood's] protest dreams, hers was the face of the waitress who refused to serve him, the housewife with the spit-flecked mouth cursing like a sailor. That he dreamed of a time when he was outside and marching kept his spirits up each morning when he woke in the hospital. His mind still capable of travel. (71)

Dr. King's words and the civil rights movement as a whole provide Elwood with an agency that is not felt by most of the other black youths in Nickel; it inspires him to "stand up straight" and, "while others rob [him] of [his] self-respect[,] . . . to remember who [he] is" and realize that "to do nothing [is] to undermine [his] own dignity" (25).

All of Elwood's experiences lead him to cognitively map the Southern space as a place which, despite being overwhelmingly dangerous, restrictive, and suppressive for African Americans, still has the potential for freedom and a hopeful future. This attempt to map his position within the spatial milieu of the South allows him to sustain himself. Ron Eyerman explains that "because of the subordinate position of blacks generally, 'sustaining' always [contains] a political dimension, in that a maintenance of hope in such a situation is always subversive" (207). By utilizing affective subjectivities, Elwood can invest the sliver of hope he has found in the present into actively seeking a future in which "[African Americans] *are significant* . . . [African Americans] *are worthful*" and they can "*walk the streets of life everyday with* [a] *sense of dignity and a sense of somebody-ness*" (Whitehead 179). Elwood has hope, and by simply finding some optimism and freedom within the Southern space he is claiming his own sense of self. He has the agency to challenge and change the racist Southern ideological status quo that the Nickel Academy signifies—Elwood has the power to "Get rid of Nickel" (156).

II. The Potential of Strength in Shared Hope

Turner, the other protagonist in *The Nickel Boys*, has an affective journey that is far more complex than Elwood's. When we are introduced to Turner he is described by Elwood as someone with an "eerie sense of self"; someone who is "inside and above at the same time; a part and apart"; someone who "doesn't belong" yet has "never not been there" (Whitehead 55). Turner is almost ghost-like, unstuck in time and place, with little or no agency. He is the antithesis of Elwood because he lacks any solid conviction or belief about a hopeful future. Indeed, even his first words in the novel are him telling Elwood to "quit [his] eager-beaver shit" (53), and he therefore initially acts as a foil to Elwood's relentless optimism. Unlike Elwood, Turner sees his position in the world as an African American as negative and inflexible. His cognitive mapping at the start of the novel locates him in a space that provides no chance for present or future happiness because all people, spaces, and institutions in the American South act to crush him as a black man:

> The blinders Elwood wore, walking around. The law was one thing—you can march and wave signs around and change a law if

> you convince enough white people . . . You can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other. Nickel was racist as hell . . . but the way Turner saw it, wickedness went deeper than skin color . . . It was people. (103)

Turner's nihilistic beliefs stand in strong contrast to Elwood's humanistic hope. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed quotes separate explanations by Erich Fromm and Carol J. Farran to delineate hope as both "any attempt to bring about social change in the direction of greater aliveness, awareness, and reason" (Fromm 6) and "the ability to make expectations fluid and not to be overcome by the absoluteness of the present" (Farran et al. 8). Here, Turner does not believe social change will improve his being, nor does he believe the world will alter for the better from the present. For Turner things may progress superficially, but the absoluteness of human evil will always be constant. Thus hoping for a better future is merely a form of pacification.

Turner's initial pessimistic worldview is derived empirically; in other words, his despondent outlook is the result of reasoning via his experiences and memories. By relying on outsider observation and not feeling, Turner's (unlike Elwood's) subjectivity is initially formed through reason alone. Turner's world view is best exemplified in the novel by the annual Nickel Academy boxing match. Each year a black student and a white student are selected to fight in a boxing match, and for the past fifteen years the black student has won. The championship is viewed as the black students' "sole acquaintance with justice at Nickel," with the combat serving "as a kind of mollifying spell, to tide them through the daily humiliations" (Whitehead 97). Turner, however, secretly witnesses a conversation between Griff (the black student contender for the current year) and Spencer (one of Nickel's sadistic white supervisors), who insists Griff "take a dive in the third round or else they'll take him out back" (101). Turner accepts this turn of events as further proof of the "rigged game" that he believes African American life to be. It reminds him of the card hustlers he observed while growing up in his neighborhood with Turner "as neither hustler nor mark, outside the game but knowing all its rules" (108). Thus, when Turner surveys the crowds the day of the boxing match, he alone recognizes the false optimism it provides:

> The white men will put up their money and the black boys will put up their hopes, and then the confidence man turns over the ace of spades and rakes it all in. Turner remembered the excitement of [the first boxing match he saw when he first came to Nickel], the deranged joy in the realization that they were allowed to have something for a change. They were happy for a few hours, spending time in the free world, then it was back to Nickel.
>
> Suckers, all of them. (108).

Having told Elwood what he overheard about the match-rigging, Turner takes satisfaction in "Elwood's disdain at the whole performance" and his "new bend toward cynicism" (110). Yet, as the match progresses, Turner begins to be "swayed by the magic of the big fight . . . certain Griff was going to win even though he knew he wasn't" (110). Despite all reasoned proof to the contrary, Turner's affective subjectivity is awakened in this situation, and by "putting up his hope" he comprehends that for himself and the other black boys watching the match the mere potential for victory is "real—in their blood and minds—even if it was a lie" (110).

Turner is unique in the novel because of his understanding of the duality of African American existence—African Americans are both the "black body that night in the ring" that refuses to go down *and* the black body that the white men take out "back to those two iron rings" (112). Turner begrudgingly accepts the strength of shared hope albeit with the knowledge that Griff's victory was an error.[9] Turner understands the necessity of the black boys in the Nickel Academy taking "[Griff's] tears for those of triumph" because "if it made the boys feel better to believe that Griff escaped, broke away and ran off into the free world," no one should tell them otherwise (112). Conversely, Turner also recognizes the reality of the cycles of violence inflicted upon African Americans and how these injustices are continually rendered invisible: "Most of those who know the story of the rings in the trees are dead by now. The iron is still there. Rusty. Deep in the heartwood. Testifying to anyone who cares to listen" (112). Yet, by still "putting up his hopes," Turner has an emotional "glitch" which functions to snap him out of the interpellated performativity of

[9] Griff, not being very good at arithmetic, thought the third and final round of the boxing match was the second round and so didn't "take the fall" when he was supposed to. Griff only realized the error and his fate after the referee declared him the winner when Turner overhears Griff desperately shouting to Spencer, "I thought it was the second! I thought it was the second!" (Whitehead 112).

his life that comes from his subjugation as a black man in the American South in the 1960s. These "glitches" provide him with momentary euphoric feelings of freedom despite the acknowledged reality of his situation.

III. Affective and Subjective Melding in *The Nickel Boys*

Turner prioritizes mere survival, while Elwood prioritizes achieving a better life through change, consequently their subjectivities are initially established as antithetical in the novel. However, as the novel progresses Turner becomes more open to Elwood's optimism while Elwood begins to grasp and better navigate the realities of the African American situation. Elwood's and Turner's distinct personalities and subject positions begin to meld into a singular identity. This occurs both figuratively and literally because at the end of the novel it is revealed that the adult "Elwood" is, in actuality, Turner. Whitehead subtly foreshadows this reveal by gradually shifting the restricted third-person narrative point of view from Elwood to Turner in the Nickel Academy sections as the novel progresses. The "young Elwood and Turner" sections are also intercut with the adult "Elwood" sections which further prefigure the reveal at the end of the novel because "Elwood's" personality as an adult seems completely at odds with Elwood's personality as a teenager. The disclosure that Turner took Elwood's identity after they attempted to escape the Nickel Academy requires the reader to re-evaluate the sections of the novel with "Elwood" as an adult in New York and understand that the novel's emotional focus is not Elwood, but rather Elwood's influence on Turner's affective peregrination during and following his escape from Nickel.

To understand Whitehead's shift in his understanding of African American subjectivity one needs to clearly demarcate the emotional changes Turner goes through as he journeys out of Nickel in the South, to New York in the North, and finally back to the South to recover Elwood's body at the close of the novel. Brian Massumi explains that "the capacity to affect or be affected" can be connected to "a *transition*" which is "*felt*, as the passing of a threshold to a higher or lower power of existence, understood as an affective readiness for subsequent encounter" (93). Ostensibly, what Turner experiences with Elwood in Nickel Academy and in New York in the aftermath of Elwood's death can be read as Turner oscillating between higher and lower levels of autonomy and subjectivity because of the undulating emotions of hope and hopelessness that

pass between him, Elwood, and their shared memories. As previously stated, when Turner first meets Elwood, he is reluctant to accept Elwood's optimistic outlook. Yet, as their time together in Nickel progresses, Turner's feelings begin to "glitch" and, against his better (rational) judgement, he begins to be affected by Elwood. The emotions that pass (or transition) between them give Turner a more profound sense of self and agency.

The apogee of Turner and Elwood's affective melding occurs just prior to the timespace shift in the novel, when they are both admiring the Christmas lights they have put up at Nickel for the local community Christmas fair. Earlier in the novel a young Elwood listens to *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* wherein Dr. King discusses "Fun Town," an amusement park his daughter longed to visit but could not because of segregation laws. Dr. King consoles his daughter by telling her to "resist the lure of hatred and bitterness" and "even though you can't go to Fun Town, I want you to know that you are as good as anybody who goes into Fun Town" (Whitehead 10). Elwood is strongly affected by this story. He too has memories of the commercials for the park, which advertises free admission for a perfect report card, and which thus inspired him to study hard and get all A's and keep the "stack of evidence for the day they opened Fun Town to all God's children, as Dr. King promised" (10). As Turner and Elwood watch the Christmas lights from a distance, it is *Turner*, and *not Elwood*, who remembers Fun Town:

> It reminded Turner of something, then it came to him—that amusement park, Fun Town, from the TV commercials . . . The other boys talked about the place from time to time, they'd go there when they were out in the free world again. Turner thought that was stupid. They didn't let colored people in those nice places. *But there it was before him, pointed at the stars, decked in a hundred flickering lights, waiting for takeoff: a rocket. Launched in darkness toward another dark planet they couldn't see.*
>
> "It looks nice," Turner said.
>
> "We did a good job," Elwood said.
>
> (128-29; emphasis added).

As Ahmed explains, "emotions are what move us, and how we are moved involves interpretations of sensations" that are "dependent on past

interpretations that are not necessarily made by us, but that come before us" (171). Ahmed's explanation can also be tied to the definition of affect as being triggered by interpellated and hegemonic culture and history. Thus, the reason this is the apex of Elwood and Turner's "affective melding" is because it presents Turner as someone who is now overcome by an emotion which has first been felt/remembered by people within his community and history (Elwood, Martin Luther King, the other black boys in the academy) and then transitioned onto him. This shared African American cultural memory, despite not being overtly discussed, results in a shared hope. Hope, as described by Massumi, is about "a sense of potential to [a] situation" (3). This is because, for Massumi, uncertainty in a situation "about what you might be able to do once you exit [a] particular context . . . can actually be empowering—once you realize that it gives you a margin of maneuverability and you focus on that rather than on projecting success or failure" (2). The "rocket" Turner describes, represents the potential for a future free of segregation on a "planet far from here." The mere latency of what could be on that "planet," passed on to him by Elwood, is what drives Turner beyond this point in the story. It is what gives him the power to pass the evidence gathered by Elwood of Nickel Academy's corruption to the school authorities. It is what gives him the power to enact his and Elwood's escape from Nickel Academy and so prevent Elwood from being taken "out back" for collecting the evidence of Nickel corruption.

As they are making their escape both Elwood and Turner imagine their potential futures. Elwood hopes "to take up the challenge again" because "if he wanted things to change, what else was there to do but stand up?" (Whitehead 198). Turner's hopes are simpler; he envisions the potential to reach the north because "it wasn't as bad as down here—a negro could make something of himself. Be his own man. Be his own boss. And if there was no train, he'd crawl on his hands and knees" (198). Thus, despite their differing priorities—survival, a better life through change—both Turner and Elwood have formed and shared an affective subjectivity through hope.

IV. Using Shared Memories and Collective Trauma to Locate the "African American Self"

The Nickel Boys has a significant timespace jump from the early 1960s Nickel Academy in the South to the late 1960s New York in the North at the

start of Chapter 11. The chapter prior to this ends with Elwood and Turner observing the Nickel Academy Christmas lights, which signals a supposed newfound cautious optimism for the two protagonists via a shared affective subjectivity formation. Yet, when we are introduced to the adult "Elwood," this subject position and hope appears to be altered. The New York sections of the novel follow the adult "Elwood" as he navigates a space that he initially claims provides him with a sense of shared community and identity that was not found at Nickel:

> [In Nickel] you could sleep in a room crammed with sixty boys and still understand that you were the only person on earth. Everybody around and nobody around at the same time. Here [in New York City] everybody was around and by some miracle you didn't want to wring their neck but give them a hug. (Whitehead 158)

A few pages later "Elwood" negates this idea about the city providing a sense of community. He admits that the real reason he likes the city is because "nobody knew him—and he liked the contradiction that the one place that *did* know him was the one place he didn't want to be" (166). "Elwood," instead of seeking emotional solace in community, now prefers seeking it in isolation. This jars with how the reader expects an adult Elwood to behave, especially if he successfully made it out of Nickel and escaped out of the South to the freedom of New York city. Instead of "taking up the challenge" of positive active African American social engagement because of his memories of Nickel, as the young Elwood claimed he would, the adult "Elwood" disengages from his memories and attempts to bury his past.

It is revealed at the climax of the novel that the adult "Elwood" is Turner, and the real Elwood was shot and killed while both boys were attempting to escape from Nickel. This disclosure explains why the adult "Elwood" behaves so contradictorily. After Elwood's death Turner decides to take his identity, "to honor his friend. To live for him" (201) and hopes he can "[turn] into a man he [thinks] Elwood would be proud of" (202). Turner justifies his motivations and life in New York as a tribute to Elwood's memory:

> In some ways Turner had been telling Elwood's story ever since his friend died, through years and years of revisions, of getting it right, as he stopped being the desperate alley cat of his youth and turned him into a man he thought Elwood would have been proud of. It was not enough to survive, you have to live . . . In Elwood's name, he tried to find another way. Now here he was. *Where had it taken him*? (202-03; emphasis added).

What is it about Turner's achievements as an adult that still hinders his hope for a fulfilled future? Turner, now without Elwood, regresses back to "reason" and believes he can achieve this by attaining material success. Turner has transformed the original hope they shared into what Ahmed refers to as a "lost object"—something which encrypts the object of hope and "blocks more creative forms of political and personal action" (186). For Ahmed, this transformation of hope "can work to extend investments in social norms precisely in the failure of the investment to be returned" (186). Elwood's initial and unfettered hope was inspired by MLK's *At Zion Hill*, wherein he called for African Americans to live "*life every day with* [a] *sense of dignity and* [a] *sense of somebody-ness*" (Whitehead 23-24). And so, Elwood's determination stems from achieving a future wherein all African Americans could "stand up straight and maintain [their] sense of who [they] are" (24). Turner reconstitutes this hope into something it's not: achieving the American Dream. For Turner, by transforming the hope he and Elwood had into achieving material middle-class success, he is impeding any actual action that returns genuine uplift and understanding to the African American condition. Turner buries his memories and African American trauma and instead focuses on achieving the American puritan middle-class dream, which is structured in a way that elevates white people through the active exploitation and exclusion of black people. Throughout his time in New York, Turner has lost all sense of identity by investing in this "lost object" of white financial and middle-class security and situating himself in a space, unlike Nickel, that doesn't know him at all. An example of this is his rejection of Chickie Pete, another Nickel survivor who asks for work at Turner's moving company. Turner does not give him his business card, which displays "Mr. Elwood Curtis, President," indicating a success which would allow him to elevate Chickie Pete out of poverty (165). Instead, Turner "rip[s] up Chickie Pete's red napkin [with his contact details]

and toss[es] it out the window" of the cab after they part ways (168). This action emphasizes Turner's choice to isolate himself from any emotional connections with other African Americans by not sharing his memories of Nickel and hiding his trauma. However, the consequences of this choice burst through when the "darkness crept up on him" and "nightmares . . . tormented him, the ones he claimed he did not remember" (203). This results in Turner's hopelessness and questioning of where his journey out of Nickel has truly taken him.

The cure for Turner's malaise is delivered through the literal unburying of his past. The discovery of the bodies buried at Nickel and the subsequent media exposé forces him to share his true identity, past, and trauma with his wife Millie, another African American. He unburdens himself after being triggered by a passing remark she makes about the Nickel Academy news story: "She didn't get it. How could she, living in the free world her whole life?" (202). Turner's reaction to Millie's remarks may initially be presented as a reprimand because she cannot possibly relate to his individual experience, but Whitehead ingeniously subverts this by shifting to Millie's narrative point-of-view as she comprehends and recalls all the evidence of his repressed trauma, "the scar she never noticed but was right in front of her" (204). Whitehead then takes Millie's understanding beyond mere sympathy and into empathy because both Turner and Millie, as African Americans, share the same cultural trauma and memory:

> They were the same age. She had grown up in the same country with the same skin . . . It was hard to remember sometimes how bad it used to be—bending to a colored fountain when she visited her family in Virginia, the immense exertion white people put into grinding them down—and then it all returned in a rush set off by tiny things, like standing on a corner trying to hail a cab, a routine humiliation she forgot five minutes later because if she didn't, she'd go crazy, and set off by the big things, a drive through a blighted neighborhood snuffed out by that same immense exertion, or another boy shot dead by a cop: They treat us like subhumans in our own country. Always have. Maybe always will. (204)

It is Millie who presents Whitehead's thesis on post-2016 African American realism. Prominent present-day African American studies scholars

and critics have stressed the United States as "a syndicate arrayed to protect its exclusive power to dominate and control [black] bodies" (Coates 42), with African Americans trapped "in sociolegal webs of domination and subordination" (Valdes et al. 2). Turner needs to engage with his memories and conceptualize them—his memories as a captive and then as a fugitive, his memories with Elwood, both blissful and difficult. These memories all function to help locate a self within Turner, aiming to understand his "actions and their emotional basis" whereby his "past becomes present through [his] embodied reactions" as he carries out his daily life and so "helps to account for human behavior" (Eyerman 5). As Millie points out, Turner is able to "come out of that place and make something of himself . . . his deception was nothing compared to what he had done with his life" (Whitehead 204). Turner has the potential to make something of himself and become autonomous—not in spite of overwhelming subjugation from white America, but because of shared black support pulled from this shared trauma, memory, and history. To elaborate, the hope or potential for change not only exists between Elwood and Turner, but between *all* African Americans. Massumi argues for an autonomy that "has to do more with how you connect to others and to other movements, how you can modulate those connections, to multiply and intensify," and that what you are and "what you can do, your potential, is ultimately defined by your connectedness" (40). Massumi's idea can be linked to Eyerman's claims about African American identity as a "shared reworking of the past" that gives African Americans cultural autonomy and prevents them from assimilating with predominantly oppressive American ideology (Eyerman 222). To find peace and happiness—to live—Turner needs to engage with and not reject the emotions and memories informed through his experiences at Nickel.

The Nickel Boys ends on a moment of profound earnestness. As Ahmed stated, "the question of the future is an affective one" because "it is a question of hope for what we might yet be, as well as fear for what we could become" (184). Throughout his adult life, Turner feared that he had not become what Elwood had hoped for. With Millie's encouragement, Turner decides to return to Florida, share his memories at Nickel, be the voice for all the black boys, and "tell the White House Boys that he was one of them, and he survived, like them" (Whitehead 207). The novel's dénouement has Turner seated in the dining area of the Radisson Hotel, which is revealed to be the refurbished Richmond Hotel where Elwood's grandmother used to work. Thus, with Turner, an African

American man, able to sit and order food, he achieves Elwood's original hope from 1954: "Sooner or later, though, the door would swing wide to reveal a brown face . . . enjoying the fine-smelling fare the cook put out. [Elwood] was sure of it" (16). This connection is no longer felt by Turner in 2016, who declares in the dining room that "he [is] hungry . . . and that [is] enough" (208). Turner no longer experiences emotional "glitches" because he has become a black man who understands who he is and recognizes that to do nothing for the betterment of African Americans is to "undermine [his] own dignity" (25). Turner, by using the shared memories and affective subjectivity of African Americans, is able to use his individual force to strengthen his community's collective power. The novel ends with Elwood's hope for the future fulfilled, indicating Whitehead's shift to a subjectivity that engages with collective memory and shared trauma and so, as Eyerman argues, allows for African American progress that can mean something other than shedding or overcoming the past.

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